

The Hand

ROBERT T. WUKASCH

The hand rested on the shelf momentarily, then disappeared. The light was not too good and I could but distinguish it to be a male hand, not a large one, medium, with long fingers.

I won't tell you who I am, nor how I came to be lying on my belly here: I was peeking at someone, spying on him.

Ah! there was that hand again on the shelf; I wished I could see who he was, but damnit, all I could see was that shelf full of bottles. This sufficed. Wait! the hand withdrew, and below me the light was being focused toward the shelf. The bottles began to take definite form — beakers—jars—small wide glasses, tall narrow glasses, and bottles all sizes with labels—

Below me there came a pacing noise. What in the hell was he doing now? It stopped, a slight shuffling of feet—there was the hand again upon the shelf, balled into a fist. Slowly it relaxed, the bent fingers unfolding, as the tentacles of an octopus, the tapering tips barely touching the bottles. Palm down it was now, flat on the shelf. The fingers slowly curled and began to drum.

Suddenly it disappeared and more hurried pacing ensued. There was a barrage of splashing water on something metallic—he must have turned the faucet on—but now it was off except a drip-drip-drip- on the steel surface.

There it was again; now only the fingers and finally, but the tips, clinging to the edge of the shelf. Each began to follow the other, sideways, first up one side of the shelf, then down the other. The

panicky fingers ceased. The whole hand appeared now; it was trembling and appeared damp as if perspiring. I nudged closer to the edge, as close as I could; if he saw me it would be disastrous.

Suddenly the quivering hand stopped, one finger raised, touched the cork tip of a small bottle, pulled it from the row, and now the entire hand clenched it, the label showing.

The hand jerked back, and there was a splintering crash of glass upon the cement floor. It reappeared this time in a fist again, and began to pound the shelf, so that the bottles rattled.

There was a sudden stillness, silence.

The hand had grown pale now as it rested calmly on the shelf. It was impassive—gently reclining. But gradually the fingers began to pull in, the tips beneath the thumb; the hand was clenched, the fist was hard, the knuckles grew white and the sinews protruded—quickly it unclasped with lightning speed, withdrew a small vial. With a slight twist, the thumb nail flipped out the cork.

The hand disappeared, and now returned, the palm leaning against the edge of the shelf.

A deep, tomby silence—a splintering crash—the hand no more—a shuffling of feet—the thud of a body falling on something hollow—then, a crash!

I waited, tense—then slowly, slowly poked my head over the edge of the low balcony and saw beneath, a massive table overturned, the legs in the air, and protruding from beneath one edge, a deathly pale hand.